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"THE ILLUSION OF PROGRESS"

In a paper read before the joint meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Institute of Arts and Letters last December, which has just been published in *The Century Magazine*, Mr. Kenyon Cox declared that progress in art is an illusion. This is at first glance a novel point of view and one which invites scrutiny. As Mr. Cox says, "in these days all of us are to some extent believers in progress," and therefore to be told that our faith, so far as the fine arts go, is unfounded, is a shock from which we naturally recoil. Reviewing the facts of history thoughtfully, however, the honest-minded must admit the reasonableness of Mr. Cox's

statement, for as witnesses against us are arrayed Homer, Bach and Beethoven, Phidias and Michelangelo, the builders of Greece and Rome and of the Gothic cathedrals, the painters of Venice, of Spain and of Holland, great lights that burned in different epochs as beacons, no one brighter than the other though with varied quality of flame. The history of art, after its early stages, being very evidently "a history of losses here balancing gain there, of new means of expression acquired at the cost of an old one." The first essential, Mr. Cox affirms, of the production of a great work of art is a great man; "You can not have the art," he says, "without the man, and when you have the man you have the art." "His time and his surroundings will color him," he continues, "his art will not be at one time or place precisely what it might be at another; but at bottom the art is the man, and at all times and in all countries is just as great as the man."

The lesson that Mr. Cox aims to impress is not, as some might suppose, disbelief in the future or to any degree cessation of effort, but rather the avoidance of demand for novelty, and instead, increased appreciation of genuine intrinsic worth. He urges that we judge every new work for "what it is or appears in itself to be, asking of it that it be noble and beautiful and reasonable, not that it be novel or progressive," because "if it be great art it will always be novel enough, for there will be a great mind behind it and no two great minds are alike."

This is all very true and, after all, very encouraging. We are not called upon to surrender our ideals, but to cherish them; not to look backward, but forward, remembering that it may be our privilege to light a beacon, and that it is our duty to make the conditions such that once lighted it will burn most brightly. For whether there is progress in art or not, we know that art is in itself inalienably allied with the progress of civilization, and that great men are only born in the ripeness of time of great nations. Let us not despair therefore, but hold to the best.